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ABSTRACT

To help an elementary-level reader in a secondary school learn to read, the program must not threaten the student's ego or undermine peer approval, and it must be individualized, in the diagnostic-prescriptive mold. Any organizational plan that meets these criteria should be workable. The characteristics of several possible approaches are described, including reading labs, tutorial situations, resource teachers, homogeneous groups in one-teacher classrooms, and heterogeneous groups in one-teacher classrooms. (AA)

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The Problem of Teenagers Reading on Elementary Levels: An Analysis of Approaches
or
How to Teach CVC to a Dude

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This paper first outlines the problem of teenagers reading on elementary levels and then discusses alternative solutions, focusing on organizational patterns of working with them. The problem of elementary readers in secondary schools is a genuine one. There are students, many students in some schools, reading from primer level to seventh grade level but attending grades 9 through 12. These are our genuine illiterates. In order to read newspapers and instruction manuals, a seventh or eighth grade reading level is required. A readability count on the front page of the daily newspaper will show that those levels are needed. If we graduate these students without teaching them to read, we can be found guilty of producing illiterates as well as social dynamite. To quote R. Baird Shuman, "Continual failure is a hissing fuse, burning irrevocably toward the social dynamite that repeatedly frustrated students represent."[1]

As their teachers know, these students are not all low IQ. They are rather a mixture of environmentally deprived, non-school oriented, specific learning disability, and, occasionally, untaught students. The latter, the untaught, may be due to poor teachers or to moving from school to school in the early grades, or to poor attendance. There is hope for these students. The great majority are capable of learning to read at a functional level. However, most will not do so in a typical English classroom or in any other classroom composed of one teacher and 20 to 40 teenagers. Specific training is needed, more specific training than can be offered in most classrooms.

However, in the eyes of the teenager who cannot read, the need to be one of the group, like everyone else, not singled out, is the overwhelming need. This psychological necessity is probably the controlling factor in whether the program of choice will work.

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The importance of peer approval is probably also the main difference between elementary reading improvement programs and secondary ones. Its importance cannot be overemphasized. If you have a program that is not working, look for this factor. Betts, in Reading as a Thinking Process, states, "The older the child, the more his interpretation is influenced by attitudes."[2] Carl Smith and Leo Fay, in Getting Children to Read, state, "To work successfully with this age group, it is necessary to understand their sense of pride, which they must protect to live with their peers and with themselves."[3]

Several approaches and special influences on each will be described. These approaches include reading labs, tutorial situations, resource teachers, homogeneous groups in one-teacher classrooms, and heterogeneous groups in one-teacher classrooms.

Reading Labs

The reading lab is one popular approach. It is defined here as a room or rooms with materials and equipment, staffed by one teacher/director and one or more aides or co-teachers. The author is familiar with two organizational patterns that work, several labs in Pitt County, North Carolina, and one in Lakewood, Ohio, described in the Journal of Reading.[4] There are undoubtedly others, but these are the only two of which the author can write from personal experience or published reports.

In both these situations, the entire lowest sections came to the reading lab twice weekly. The key peer approval was obtained by having the entire class come. In the North Carolina school system, class sizes of 20 to 30 meant that two teachers and the classroom teacher and one paid aide and one or two student unpaid aides were needed and utilized. Thus, every student

was checked every hour. Frequent checking as soon as possible, immediate positive reinforcement, is necessary and was available.

In addition to entire homogeneous classes, both the Ohio and North Carolina labs had other students. Students from other sections applied to work in the lab at their own level. When a lower-level student sees people he knows to be really good students working in the lab, he knows that it cannot be only for "dummies." And so, no stigma is attached to the reading lab.

An additional positive factor in the North Carolina situation is that students truly choose their own levels. They may select levels 1, 2, and 3, and they choose for each class each year. Thus the student feels that he has control--another important factor in dealing with teenagers. Rotter and Coleman have indicated ". . . the disadvantaged pupil's sense of control of his fate is a key factor in how well he does in school."[5] The Lakewood, Ohio, lab had an additional method of gaining acceptance: the entire first semester of operation, it accepted only top students.

An advantage of a reading lab is the availability of non-print media. Usually, by the time the poor reader has reached high school, he has turned off to books. He has had numerous poor experiences with books. By age 15, he will pretend to be bored or at least uninterested. In reality, he is probably frightened. For whatever reason, non-print media may be much more interesting. He can manipulate the machines himself, a positive factor in maintaining his attention. He does not have cumulative negative experiences with machines. Furthermore, first grade level words and stories appear little different from ninth grade level ones on a machine. The casual observer does not spy child-like pictures, as he would in a book. Of course, reading machines do not constitute a reading program, but their availability is a positive aspect of reading labs.

Earlier research that found that reading machines were no more effective than programs without machines was conducted with earlier, less sophisticated equipment and programs and was focused on reading speed, usually. More sophisticated programs aimed more at vocabulary and comprehension skills development, as well as at phonic and sight word skills rather than at speed reading, have been developed. Hafner and Jolly, in Patterns of Teaching Reading in the Elementary School, state, "Because the teacher is neither omniscient nor omnipresent, he needs the help that is now available from advanced technology and its associated materials . . . . Alert educators are familiar with the great advances that have been made in this field and do not equate the new technology with the rudimentary, unsophisticated technology of yesteryear."[6]

Teacher roles vary from one type of reading program to another. The reading lab director has equal status with other faculty members. Of course, she must work more closely with other faculty than other teachers generally do. Thus, the director's personality and ability to get along with colleagues are very important. In addition, a high order of organizational skills is needed to manage wisely the various materials.

Optional or alternative schools where reading labs or skills labs can be found are one organizational possibility. An advantage would be that the student could go to the optional school without being singled out by his peers for ridicule. Generally, no stigma is attached. Also, more flexible scheduling may allow him to spend far more time in reading. Turee Olsen, in "Alternative Education Programs," described an alternative school in Englewood, Colorado, where students made striking gains in reading.[7]

An addition to reading lab materials can be computer-assisted instruction.

Such instruction is, at this time, still very expensive and limited in that it must be located near a computer or linked by telephone lines. However, it does offer individualization. Ideally, it can be a part of a reading lab program.

Tutorial Programs

A tutorial approach is a second major possibility. The positive aspect of this approach lies in the one-to-one nature of instruction. The negative aspect, the overwhelming aspect thus far, is that in order to offer instruction in this way, individuals must be singled out and removed from the peer group. It does work with younger children, and it could work in some situations with secondary students. But the separation from the peer group is a major negative factor.

In addition, to teach reading skills to a teenager who has been exposed to reading for many years requires rather specialized training and techniques. Some more extensive training of tutors is required than for younger students. Thus, volunteer aides are not usually prepared, and the school can seldom pay enough professional reading teachers, or even closely supervised paraprofessionals, to have much impact.

Another problem arises: from which class can the student be removed--which ones can he afford to miss? The tutor-teacher relationship is a very delicate one, since some time when the teacher does <u>not</u> feel the tutee is missing vital classwork must be arranged. Many teachers find it very frustrating to adjust to students coming and going, thus missing parts of the instruction being offered. However, the main problem with <u>secondary</u> students is fear of peer disapproval. It is seldom possible for the students to go to the tutor due to this factor.

The Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Public Schools initiated a before-and-after school program of voluntary reading instruction. "However, the program was considerably hampered by the difficulty in getting students to volunteer."[8]

The director of a tutorial program must be skilled at selection of materials for use by relatively untrained tutors. He must be able to maintain enthusiasm in his tutors when little or no progress shows. He must be adept at working with colleagues in a most sensitive area--scheduling. Some people would claim that tutorial programs would be cheaper than laboratory programs at the secondary level. They should note that salaries of tutors must be paid each month, year in and year out, while machines are not bought new each year and materials can be used many times. Of course, there are salaries involved in reading labs, but the teacher-pupil ratio can be higher than a one-to-one tutorial ratio.

Resource Teachers

The resource teacher is another possible avenue of reading help. Resource teachers may be defined several ways: (1) teachers who help regular classroom teachers prepare materials, perhaps team teaching on occasion or demonstration teaching, and (2) teachers who have resource rooms to which students come for help. The latter one, the teacher in the resource room, could be described as a mini-reading lab. Mini-labs differ from the reading labs described above in that students are removed, or singled out, from their peer groups. Again, very often these students do not wish to be removed from the group, and so the program begins with a negative attitude. There may be schools in which these have worked, but a search of the literature reveals only one in-school example, and in that case a lack of tutees was cited as a problem.[9]

The resource teacher working with other teachers has several disadvantages.

The position is often ill-defined and poorly understood by the teachers. Frequently the administration hires a resource person to achieve curriculum reform, primarily to help secondary-trained teachers recognize the need for teaching reading skills and learn to teach the skills. Unfortunately, many teachers are fearful of "outside interference" or someone suggesting, even by implication, that they are not good teachers. In addition, such resource teachers have no real authority. They are in a position that may need the status of supervisor, with the support of the central office, but they are, in fact, without the title, or the salary, or the prestige, or the clout, of the central office supervisor. Thus, their hands are tied.

Very often curriculum reform is needed, but the elementary level reader in the high school needs even more, specific training in basic reading skills. Furthermore, he is psychologically unable to admit this need for basic skills to his peers, often even to peers with the same learning needs. Therefore, a group situation seldom works for him.

More than curriculum reform is needed. Reorganization so that reading skills can be taught in a non-ego-threatening manner is necessary. A resource teacher with little budget cannot achieve this reorganization. At best, she can make the classroom more relevant to the student's needs. This is no mean accomplishment, but it does not make the individual student literate.

In sum, a resource teacher could, where the faculty genuinely wanted such a person, help in making the classroom situation more relevant. However, one or two resource persons in a high school do not constitute a reading program for elementary level readers.

Homogeneous Groups

Homogeneous groups in one-teacher classrooms are the fourth alternative in many high schools. The very word homogeneous is misleading, of course.

Such groups may have a narrower range than heterogeneous, but most often the range of reading levels is still primer level through about eighth grade.

Before the monster of ability or achievement grouping is aroused, it should be stressed that the teenager must select his class, his level, himself. He should have guidance from his parents and perhaps his teachers and counselors. But in the end, he must decide two things: (1) what his aspirations are--how hard he wants to work, and (2) what level he can handle, no matter how hard he works. The author has worked for three years in a school system where the student selected his level, and it does work.

However, after you get the student in such a classroom, then what can you teach that will enable all students to learn? Remember that wide range of reading levels, perhaps eight or nine years. What can be taught depends partly on the size of this homogeneous class. To quote a recent study, "Low achievers did best in classes with 28 or fewer students, according to a two and a half year study of 2,000 Philadelphia public school students by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia. Class size over 31 reduced the achievement of all students."[10]

Even 28 students seems too many to cope with individually with only one teacher and no outside help. Note that individually is the limiting word. There are, of course, some materials that can be taught to the group. However, to teach reading skills to a group where Joe needs to know what sound a makes and Mary needs to know how to find the main idea in seventh grade level material is not possible. When individualization can be effected, this skills instruction is possible. But the author has never seen it accomplished with 35 students and one teacher, and a search of the literature reveals no description of such a program.

Nevertheless, a student cannot be in a lab situation all day, nor should he be. In the content areas, such as history or auto mechanics, adjustments will have to be made. Here the instructor needs to become trained in teaching his subject with focus on (1) alternatives to reading and (2) guided reading, where the instructor can find or write materials at more approximately appropriate levels. These solutions are not ideal, but they are probably necessary compromises, since the public seems unwilling to pay for the 1 to 10 or 15 teacher-pupil ratio probably necessary to teach every child to function at his highest level.

Heterogeneous Groups

The fifth alternative for elementary level readers in secondary schools is heterogeneous groups in one-teacher classrooms. Unfortunately, this is often what a teacher will have to cope with. Heterogeneous grouping means that the teacher is likely to have a range of reading levels from fifth grade to grade 14 or 16, and occasionally primer level to grade 14 or 16. Pity the poor teacher! And pity the poor student! If the class is typical--25 or more students--the teacher working alone usually chooses one of two alternatives: (1) he prepares the college-bound students, or (2) he hits the middle and hopes for the best. Obviously, neither of these serves the needs of the poor reader. He wanders through high school slightly more lost than he did grade school--with no help in sight. He often finds expression in talking back or open defiance. Again, social dynamite.

Articles describing some degree of individualization in a one-teacher classroom have been published, but close examination reveals that the students were not elementary level readers but were close to or above grade level. Such students are more capable of working independently than their peers who

do not read as well. The author has not been able to find a group of 25 or more low level readers with only one teacher where the students work individually.

School administrators sometimes remark, "We have almost no one in our school reading below seventh grade level." The chance score, which Fry calls the "orangoutang" (sic) score, should be noted.[11] In some tests used in public high schools today, the chance score in standardized tests may be as high as seventh grade. This means that every student, even if he closes his eyes, as long as he fills in a choice for each item, will score approximately seventh grade. This is not essentially the test manufacturer's fault. In nearly every situation, the test manual states that the student should not make a wild guess but should guess only when he can eliminate at least one, preferably two, of the four choices. Furthermore, it always states that the student must read each item before answering that item. However, students, by the time they are in secondary schools, are a little more test-wise than this. They know better than to leave a multiple choice blank, and they will black in one choice for every item. And so, when the test scores are returned, it may appear that the students are not reading as low as some people had guessed. In reality, however, if the lower level scores were checked, it would be discovered that sometimes the scores were as many as six and seven years lower than indicated--that is to say, a student scoring as high as sixth or seventh grade reading level might actually be reading only on the primer level. Improvements have been made recently, however, and newer tests have much lower chance scores, usually around the third or fourth grade levels.

Summary

In sum, to help an elementary level reader in a secondary school learn

to read, (1) the program must not be ego-threatening; it must not undermine the student's peer approval; and (2) it must be individualized, in the diagnostic-prescriptive mold. Any organizational plan that meets these two criteria should be workable.

Of course, in the final analysis, it is the teacher who makes the difference. Even the best-equipped lab will fail if the lab director is not a caring person. The director must accept each student as he is, never showing surprise, and he must expect the student to learn. Smith and Fay call for an "empathetic environment" and "help in a non-patronizing way."[12] When such a person is found and supplied with adequate materials, equipment, and help for an individualized program, one socially acceptable to the student, the needs of the elementary level reader in the secondary school will be much better served.

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